

A Preliminary Examination of Facts Up Front: Survey Results from Primary Shoppers and At-Risk Segments



NUTRITION DISCLOSURES displayed on food packages communicate nutrition information at the point of purchase and potentially make a positive contribution to public health.¹ Although the public is familiar with the Nutrition Facts label, a strongly emerging nutrition labeling format, front of package (FOP), holds promise in providing useful dietary guidance. FOP nutrition labeling systems have the potential to increase consumer awareness, understanding, engagement, and usage of nutrition information. In fact, several studies suggest that nutrition information displayed on the FOP can help shoppers better understand and use on-package nutrition information.^{2,3}

Two general types of FOP systems exist in the marketplace: nutrient specific and summary systems. Nutrient-specific systems typically display several key nutrients and the amount of each nutrient contained in the product per serving size (eg, Facts Up Front system used in the United States). Summary systems provide a singular

overall nutrition score or evaluation (eg, Guiding Stars system used in the United States or the National Heart Foundation Tick). These FOP systems display either a binary (healthy or not healthy) or a graded (zero to three stars) overall nutrition score for the product.

Research is mixed with regard to which type of system works best. In a review of 38 nutrition labeling studies, evidence suggests that summary systems can be easier to process than nutrient specific systems.⁴ Although efficiency in processing nutrition information is important, nutrient-specific systems have been shown to perform better across other goals of FOP systems, which include assisting shoppers in identifying differences in nutritional attributes among product alternatives and increasing the proportion of consumers who readily notice, understand, and use the available information to make more nutritious choices for themselves and their families.^{5,6} Two nutrient specific systems have garnered the most attention from nutrition researchers: Guideline Daily Amounts (GDA) and Traffic Light (TL) systems. Some research has found that consumers can more easily interpret nutrition information when the FOP system uses color to indicate “low” or “high” levels of nutrients.⁷⁻⁹ Other research has found that GDA-style systems can be equally effective as TL-style systems at helping shoppers evaluate food products and decide what products to buy.¹⁰ Despite the growing body of research on FOP nutrition information across many disciplines, a “best” option has not been evident. Recently, Congress directed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to undertake a study with the Institute of Medicine to examine FOP labeling systems. In two extensive reports, the expert committee concluded that no FOP nutrition information system was superior to all

others. Each had strengths and weaknesses.¹¹ Prior research has called for more empirical research to study popular FOP nutrition labeling options.^{4,12}

FACTS UP FRONT

Facts Up Front is a unique FOP nutrition labeling system (Figure 1) developed by the Grocery Manufacturers Association and the Food Marketing Institute for use by their membership, who represent the bulk of the food and beverage companies and food retailers, respectively. The initiative is aligned with the US Department of Agriculture and the US Food and Drug Administration labeling regulations and dietary guidance, in that Facts Up Front brings key nutrition information taken directly from the Nutrition Facts label to a more prominent position on the front of the food package to assist shoppers in making nutritional assessments of foods at the point of purchase. The nutrition information displayed on the Facts Up Front FOP labeling system includes a set of icons that displays calories, along with “nutrients to limit”: saturated fat, sodium, and sugar per serving. The label can include up to two additional icons displaying “nutrients to encourage,” such as fiber, vitamins, calcium, and other nutrients that contribute to a healthy diet when the product is a good source (10% Daily Value or higher) of these nutrients.¹³ Recent research suggests that FOP nutrition disclosures consistent with the Facts Up Front format can improve comprehension of nutrient content of food and help shoppers understand nutrition information displayed on food packages versus packages without FOP nutrition disclosures or “calorie only” disclosures.¹⁴ Other research has shown that Facts Up Front can outperform TL labels on consumer estimation of some nutrients such as sugar, saturated fat, and sodium (although TL labels outperform

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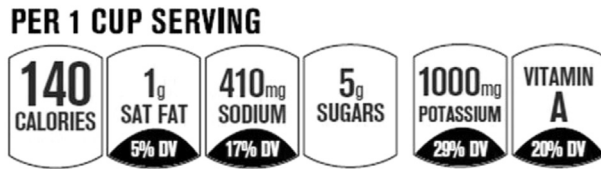


Figure 1. Example of the Facts Up Front System.

Facts Up Front on other variables such as user friendliness).⁷ Initial research on Facts Up Front is encouraging; however, no large-scale assessments have examined initial consumer awareness, understanding, engagement, and usage of the Facts Up Front labeling system.

The purpose of this article is to investigate consumer perceptions of the Facts Up Front nutrition labeling system and to determine usage patterns among subpopulations of Americans. Specifically, this is an assessment to measure awareness, understanding, engagement, and usage of Facts Up Front among primary shoppers, with an emphasis on African-American and Hispanic populations. Results of this study have important implications for the practice of nutrition and dietetics because FOP nutrition information can be a critical tool that registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) and nutrition and dietetics technicians, registered (NDTRs) can emphasize to help clients make more informed food purchases, as well as to keep consumers aware of the various systems available and their benefits and weaknesses.

DESCRIPTION OF ASSESSMENT

Survey participants were recruited by a professional marketing research firm from a national web panel; they represented a diverse set of demographic, educational, socioeconomic, and lifestyle attributes.* A total of 1,363 female adults aged 25 to 49 years with

*A two-stage approach was used to ensure a nationally representative sample. First, the sample was balanced demographically before sending survey invitations; the final survey data were weighted using a number of demographic variables to reflect the population. Second, pilot testing was done before conducting the survey to ensure equivalency between the online data collection method and the more traditional random digit dialing method.

children living in the household participated in a 23-minute survey. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, and care was taken to ensure that survey participants represented all US geographic regions and that they lived in both rural and urban areas. Recent research suggests that mothers are an important demographic to target at the point of purchase, because 66% of women handle most of the household grocery shopping, and 84% are the sole preparers of meals in their households.¹⁵ To more closely examine at-risk ethnic minority populations, the final dataset included oversamples of 249 African-American and 241 Hispanic American shoppers. The survey included questions designed to measure shopper awareness of the Facts Up Front nutrition labeling system (Figure 1), as well as some usage questions related to Facts Up Front and the Nutrition Facts label. See Figure 2 for a summary of the survey measures.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Results show that 64% of the total sample recalled seeing the Facts Up Front FOP nutrition labeling system while grocery shopping. Of those who reported being aware of Facts Up Front, 80% reported that they looked at the Facts Up Front label during their most recent shopping trip. The product type with Facts Up Front recalled most readily were ready-to-eat cereals (41.7% of participants), followed by granola bars (24%) and crackers (15%).

Awareness of Facts Up Front varied significantly by race ($P<0.01$). White and African-American shoppers reported similar levels of awareness (62% and 60%, respectively), whereas awareness was claimed by 75% of Hispanics, who were significantly more aware than both whites ($P<0.01$) and African Americans ($P<0.01$). These results are somewhat surprising, because prior research shows that only 42% of Hispanic and African-American

shoppers regularly use the back-of-package Nutrition Facts label (which was significantly lower than the 56% of white shoppers who reported using the Nutrition Facts label in previous research).⁵

Awareness also varied significantly by education ($P<0.01$). Fifty-seven percent of the study participants with a high school education (or less) reported awareness of the labeling system. Shoppers with some college education were significantly more aware of Facts Up Front (64% were aware) than the less-educated consumers ($P<0.05$). Shoppers with a college degree reported the highest level of awareness (69%), which was significantly higher than shoppers with a high school degree or less ($P<0.01$). These findings are not surprising and are consistent with prior research that has demonstrated that education level is a significant positive predictor of nutrition label use (Table 1).¹⁶

When both race and education were examined simultaneously, a pattern emerged. Significant differences were observed across education levels for white shoppers ($P<0.01$), but not among African Americans or Hispanics ($P>0.05$). Although African-American awareness (56% to 65%) and Hispanic awareness (71% to 80%) were relatively stable across education level, a larger discrepancy in awareness was seen among less educated white shoppers (51%) than among their more educated counterparts (64% to 68%). This finding is somewhat counterintuitive and suggests that white shoppers of low socioeconomic status may be a particularly important segment to target for nutrition education (Table 2).

Participants who reported being aware of Facts Up Front were prompted to respond to the measures for understanding and engagement with the nutrition labeling system when making food purchase decisions. In general, survey participants rated Facts Up Front high with regard to ease of understanding the labeling system. However, results show significant differences across race ($P<0.01$). Hispanics found Facts Up Front easier to understand than whites, but no statistical difference was observed between African Americans and Hispanics. Furthermore, results show significant differences across race for the level

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